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## Duxbury and Demon Rum

News Item from  
Town Clerk's Office

By THE REV. ROBERT MERRY

I hated to disappoint my mother but in all honesty, I had to do it this time. The situation was this: The dairy business based on North Hill had folded and my youngest brother John, with much financial backing from the bank, had made the farm over into a 9-hole golf course. Not many weeks went by with the enterprise showing real promise when thirsty golfers were asking for 19th hole accommodations. My mother was totally opposed even to the extent of banning light wine and beer and she thought she would have a strong supporter in me and it hurt me to stand with my brother and against her on this point.

I am not a golfer, not feeling that I was old enough since in my younger days as golf appeared to me to be an old man's game. Then the first thing I knew golfing turned into a total man's (and even woman's) game and I felt I was too old for it so I missed out on the game altogether. I did observe that it was a very salubrious sport and I've regretted I never took part in it. My game was tennis and I can testify to the glorious feeling that surged throughout my body as I indulged in a glass of cold beer after a couple sets. So when Mother wrote me in Princeton for my support in her hopes for an "alcohol-free" clubhouse on North Hill, I had to turn her down. I said it was a simple matter of meeting business competition and had nothing to do with morals. Today, whether you are a dues-paying member or not of the North Hill Country Club, one of the Gunnarson brothers will gladly serve you a cool drink of stimulating spirits, whether or not you bring along your clubs for a round of golf.

The North Hill Country Club is the place to go on a hot August afternoon where the grounds are open to the breezes from all directions and I hope a revolving restaurant on a high tower can be built here one day commanding a view of Cape Cod Bay and the Canal as well as Provincetown along with another 9-hole golf course. There is indeed something about alcoholic beverages that loosens muscles and tongues and relaxes egos and it is a great tragedy that its abuse can do such harm. Ceremonial toasts with some kind of alcoholic spirits has characterized human behavior from earliest times. The earliest record of this is in Noah's experience in the Bible, wittily retold by M. C. in his book "The

in America. The head crew coach noted that most managers, crew and other students had all gone down to the Hotel Griswold in Groton, across the Thames River from New London, the losers to drown their sorrow and the victors to salute the winners. The head coach summoned a couple of launch drivers and laid a charge on us. "I don't trust any of these wild guys to the highways on their way home, so you go down to the hotel about midnight and just pick up the celebrants in whatever condition you find them, guide them to the dock and load them in and bring them home to Red Top." It will take at least 2 of you to carry through the job and you'd better be prepared for a rough time. And it was indeed rough, walking through the hotel lobby and picking up these bloated derelicts and pushing them out the door onto the patio and then down to the waiting launch whose capacity was normally limited to 6 people.

It so happened at this time that a brand new type of power boat was being featured that had a concave type bow enabling the craft when it had reached a certain speed to ride above the surface of the water and with a 2-bladed propeller now deeply immersed to attain abnormal speeds. The boat was called a "seasled" and it looked exactly like a sled as it swished in and out among the yachts of America's rich and famous anchored here to watch the annual Harvard and Yale crew contests. Their drivers were a cocky bunch and sneered at displacement boats like ours that could reach speeds only less than half of theirs, as these were lifted out of the water by their concave bow. Naturally they shouted indecent epithets as we shoved our human freight, water-logged as they were with the fire water in their veins. Our wavering crew mates still had enough venom in them to give back in kind and we felt ourselves lucky when we finally rolled them over the gunwale -- there were over a dozen of them -- and off in the darkness under the big railroad bridge and on our way. Our freeboard with this load on sank to less than a foot instead of the normal 2, but with our precious cargo silent except for heavy breathing we felt we were safe and secure, there being no wind and calm waters befriended us.

All of a sudden out of the black darkness without any warning, a sea sled traveling about 45mph sped past us not more than 4 feet away and crossed our bow, its wake sweeping green water the entire length of our craft and arousing our slumbering passengers who rose to a man and laid the drivers of the sea sled low with their colorful Biblical language as soon as we caught up to them. Harvard and Yale still race at New London every year but my information is that the traditional Bacchanalian celebration has been dropped. This story I have restrained myself from telling even at our close reunions, but here

cutter 5, the latter hung up on the marsh and children on their way to grammar school were greeted by this large Coast Guard cutter hung up on dry land several feet from the water.

My last close encounter with the ravages of demon rum was in my Piusburgh parish where I had invited the AA group to have the exclusive claim on our church basement on the one night of the week that it was not in use. At first the group was referred to as "Father Merry's bunch of drunks" because some of the human derelicts that stumbled down into our basement were indeed sorry spectacles attended their meetings occasionally as a special guest "picking up sermon material" as they said, but I had a double motive: I was trying to discover at just what point these slaves of alcohol were enabled to turn around. One man named Sullivan from Lynn told of his coming home much the worse for wear and entering his house found his wife and 5 children at a supper of creamed codfish. He staggered to his place at the head of the table and as his wife in total silence served him his bowl of creamed codfish, he shouted, "Who expects me to eat this slop?" Whereupon she still in silence rushed to his place, picked up the bowl of "slop" and slammed it down on his head breaking the bowl in the process. He lunged after her and she ran into the hall and up the stairs, pausing half way as the 5 children tackled him and began to pound him unmercifully. Seeing her pause, he felt she was still under his spell so he struggled, but she called out to the children, not to spare him but to take off his glasses. This was his turning point.

My second motive in joining these AA testimonial sessions was to see just how far a person could sink into self destruction and still receive rescue. I think the one example that stands out is of a man who had lost everything through drink and taken a room in a ghetto in a cheap hotel, so cheap they still had gas lighting. In fact, that was one of the reasons he spent the night there, to take his life. So he turned on the gas lighting jet that obligingly spewed out its gas and then still fully clothed, lay down on the bed and fell fast asleep. He awoke thinking he had passed into paradise, but a few minutes eye search told him he was still in the bedroom. After walking downstairs and checking in at the front desk and submitted a complaining about the gas cutoff was told, "That couple checked out early; they just forgot to put the quarter in the slot and the gas cut off automatically. This was all this victim of alcoholic addiction needed to convince him that a higher power had intervened in his life. As a preacher, I might add that is the only way this addiction can be conquered.

Duxbury's history in dealing with demon rum, like that of many other towns, is a long and sad one. Town

spirits has characterized human behavior from earliest times. The earliest record of this is in Noah's experience in the Bible, wittily portrayed by Marc Connolly in his play *Green Pastures* where God and Noah argue whether the Ark should load on 2 kegs or one of rum. To come down to Duxbury as reported by Margery MacMillan in her charming book, *Stopping Places Along Duxbury Roads*, where she reports that Duxbury voted in town meeting in 1846 to make the town a "dry town." Anthony Kelso also refers to the liquor problem in his report of Duxbury's "First Families" in the "Duxbury Book" published by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society as their special contribution to the celebration of Duxbury's 350th anniversary. The casual reading of Town Meeting and selectmen's meeting minutes reveals a persistent presence of the alcohol problem in the deliberations of these bodies. The verbal battles that have raged over the issuance of liquor licenses have been with us for the life of the town. One can't help asking whether the problem will ever be brought under control. America did make one gigantic and disastrous effort to do this, but that is getting ahead of my story.

Our Pilgrim ancestors as historians have impressed upon us did not dare to risk drinking water. We ran into this aversion to water as a beverage when Harriet and I were visiting our young on the European continent. We had to make a special request for ice water with our meals in restaurants. I am sure the hotels that catered to American tourists served this but not the small off-beat spots we visited. They always served light wine or beer with our meals. Of course, we know this has New Testament precedent as St. Paul suggests in the third verse Chapter 5 of first Timothy. "Use a little wine for your stomach's sake." After several days of requesting water, I asked a waiter what the objection was to drinking water. "Water rusts your pipes" was the cryptic reply.

My first experience of the devastation wrought by alcohol was at the age of 6 or 7 when inebriated "soldiers of fortune" would stagger over to our lawn and lie under the huge elm tree that stood there having drunk deep of consoling spirits at the house next door that was later bought by Sabina Crosby's father. This was one of several saloons that dotted Washington St. at the close of the shipbuilding era and before Duxbury had blossomed as a desirable summer resort.

My second confrontation with the results of imbibing too much liquor took place at the end of my freshman year at Harvard when I was driving the crew coach's lunch at crew camp at Red Top, New London, CT. Harvard had won the 4-mile race for the first time in 6 years. *Clipper* readers probably know this contest is the first athletic encounter among colleges and universities

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What would have been my third confrontation with traffic in and use and abuse of alcohol occurred in my absence from town, but I did some research on it and in fact wrote 2 stories on it based on my trip to Washington, DC, and the national archives of the country's Coast Guard. I refer, of course, to what was euphemistically called "rum-running." This was a gigantic enterprise stretching over a dozen years all together. The Volstead Act was passed over Wilson's veto in October of 1917, in the moral euphoria of World War I. It did not reach enforcement until January 1920 and ended with FDR's inauguration in 1932.

Put briefly the seacoast landings included a fleet of "mother ships" that anchored at sea at intervals beyond the reach of law enforcement, i.e., the 3-mile limit. These had come down from Canada or up from the Bahamas or Cuba and discharged their cargoes to speedboats that darted out from hideaways in the bays and inlets along the shores. Under cover of darkness trucks would meet these boats and carry their contraband into the hinterland hotels where other men would take the liquor to the "speakeasies" in towns and cities.

Legends abound of these exciting days with people generally agreeing with President Wilson that the Volstead Act could not be enforced. We had our own dormitory bootlegger named Jimmy Lowell who for a price provided refreshments for any post-football parties. Also, many who would otherwise never have bothered with alcoholic beverages took to them now that it became the smart thing to do. I saw these operations from a distance but since returning from active ministry some of them have been told to me. Like the time in the middle of the night a boat had unloaded its cargo at Howland's Landing. It was between 2 and 3 am and the rum-runners were in such a hurry they overloaded the truck which capsized rounding the far end of Captain's Hill and a quick phone network brought the greatest traffic jam Duxbury had ever seen. In a matter of minutes the truck's contents had been scattered along with the truck's drivers. Dawn saw a bereaved truck lying lonely in the road until a local garage sent a wrecker. No one came forward to claim the truck for several days and then one day it just disappeared from the garage parking lot.

Another story is of the speedboat that circled the bay with a Coast Guard cutter in hot pursuit as it tossed its cans of Belgian alcohol overboard. Knowing the channels and shallow marshes as the speedboat driver did, he swept across a marsh next to what is now Bayside Marine land. As his boat drew 2 feet and the Coast Guard

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Duxbury's history in dealing with demon rum, like that of most communities, is a checkered one. Town meetings often switching from one side to the other and passing ordinances, for example, to ask the caretaker of the almshouse to enforce liquor license regulations. On Feb. 21, 1990, the Special Town Meeting that day appropriated \$300 to hire detectives to enforce the liquor laws. Only recently Town Meeting, at which I was present, ruled that no alcoholic beverages be allowed for public consumption on town-owned property. The tragic traffic deaths of 5 teenagers over a 2-year period reminded us that the problem of controlling the use of alcoholic beverages is still with us. Perhaps the problem is awaiting the swing in public sentiment which will make alcoholic abuse so socially unacceptable that few will exercise it.

As I was digging out some of these facts in Town Reports, our diligent Town Clerk Nancy Oates informed me that a new politically acceptable party has been formed in Duxbury named the "Prohibition Party." Could this be a signal that we are again on the way to greater restraint in the use of this dangerous drug?

## Around Town

Two Duxbury residents graduated from Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY, on May 26. Keith Moore, son of Mr. and Mrs. William Moore, received his BA in English, cum laude. Jessica Merry, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Merry, received her BA in English.

John Britten, principal with the Duxbury office of Snug Harbor Investments, has been named to the American Funds Group All-American Team. He was cited for outstanding service to investors in the South Shore area and for excellence in financial counseling in mutual fund investments and variable annuity contracts. He founded Snug Harbor Investments in June 1990. He graduated from the University of Florida in 1969 and lives in Duxbury

with his wife, Deborah and their 2 children.

Martha Lincoln of Duxbury, received a Midwest Universities Consortium for International Activities internship grant from Indiana University and was honored for academic excellence at a recent awards ceremony on the Bloomington campus.

Kathryn Talanian, daughter of John and Carol Talanian of Duxbury, recently graduated from Brewster Academy, Wolfeboro, NH. She was a member of the varsity alpine ski team and plans to attend Wheaton College to study liberal arts.

